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ABSTRACT

Reflecting on the contributions to individual education that literature study should make, this paper synthesizes some major directions taken by contemporary literary critics, examines the cognitive requirements for real learning, and puts these considerations into perspective as a goal for the teaching of literature. The major theories of literary criticism that are discussed include the New Criticism, structural criticism, the subjective theories of literary response, Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory, and deconstruction. In summarizing these theories, the paper notes how they fall along a spectrum of attitudes toward individual independence in reading, ranging from extremely authoritarian to extremely subjective, with the more recent ones tending toward the subjective. Next the paper considers the use of these theories to acquaint students with literary procedures and to develop in students a literary competence that leads not only to personal pleasure in responding to literature but also to a facility in discussing topics, including arguments about literature, with others. The paper concludes with the observation that the ideal goal of teaching literature is to have students learn to read and think for themselves, so that they can make personal decisions and defend these decisions during discussions with their peers. (RL)

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SUBJECTIVE CRITICISM: FROM COGNITION TO MORALITY

Marilyn K. Goldberg

Many years ago, after I taught English for a year to seniors in an experimental high school program, I asked my students what they considered to be their most important memory from that class. One woman said, "I learned that I could read a poem for myself. I didn't need to have someone explain it to me." Her response is the only one I remember from that group. I heard it with a great thrill of accomplishment and yet a tremor of fear. Then, as now, I wanted my students to leave my classes with some skill in reading a text independently, but I know that many of them wanted only to be told what to think about a text. They wanted to be told what a poem means, not, in John Ciardi's words, how it means. And if I have not taught them how it means and given them the experience of reading for themselves and sharing their experiences with each other for confirmation and rectification of their responses, then I have cause to fear that they cannot read for themselves and they do need someone to explain it to them.

I have to think about what contribution to their education I want their literature class to make. I can think of many goals--almost too many--including increased knowledge of their cultural heritage; increased ability to select good literature and enjoy the aesthetic qualities as well as the rich meanings; pleasure in good literature; increased skill in analyzing literature, society and themselves. I think that a good class in literature can contribute all these values in some measure to some students, but the most important contribution--one more likely to emerge from a class in literature than from most other classes--is a certain frame of mind, an attitude, a warm and welcoming search for the new experiences that continued reading promises them, a receptive response to the kind of sharing and consequent enlarging of their own selves through the many selves and experiences available in works of literature. I want my students to

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participate in these new experiences, recognizing something that takes place in the text and also in themselves as the text evokes a response from them. Further, if possible, I want my students to reflect with continually increasing skill upon that text, their own lives and their world. These effects, if in any degree consistently established, should cause a habit of reflection that can sustain their intellectual lives for prolonged periods of time.

In my effort to describe some justification for these ideals, my comments today synthesize some major directions taken by contemporary literary critics, glance at some cognitive requirements for real learning, and finally put these background considerations into some perspective on these potential effects that we as college English teachers can have upon our students. Particularly, I am talking about the effects reported in William Perry's longitudinal study of Harvard students in Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years. According to Perry, we can make a great difference, intellectually and ethically, in the lives of our students.

Literary critics traditionally define literature and place it within a matrix of social and cultural conditions, often, then, defining those conditions as well as the literature. Today critics are finding alternatives to the earlier efforts to objectify, to treat as would scientists the stimuli that are literary texts. The history of teaching literature in colleges--a surprisingly short history--is one of recitations and lectures. Before New Criticism, the lectures focused on cultural and historical information; after New Criticism, they focused on ways to read a text and seek what it means. As long as critics assumed that texts had one meaning that could be explicated, that approach served well. Today, the denial of many critics that texts have one meaning takes a variety of forms. Before looking at some of

these contemporary subjective approaches, let's begin with a passing glance at New Criticism.

During the times when efforts at scientific objectivity permeated our Anglo-American culture, in the 40s and 50s particularly, New Criticism offered its invaluable heuristic procedures for close reading, ostensibly leading to correct reading. New Critics provided readers and teachers of literature with verifiable standards for judging texts and describing their qualities. Discussing purely literary issues like the relative importance of text, author, and reader, New Critics came down heavily on the text as the determiner of all meaning. That aspect of New Criticism united an otherwise un-unified group of contentious scholars. Not all New Critics asserted authoritatively that texts could yield one Ultimate Truth to the well-informed and skillful reader. Even Welleck and Warren recognized the inevitability of various interpretations, but they feared that admission of any subjective response would invite the chaos of "anything goes." So they created an unstable amalgam called "perspectivism" that finally moved towards authoritarianism. T. S. Eliot himself asserted his independence as a reader; he stated, "a valid interpretation, I believe, must be . . . an interpretation of my own feeling when I read. . . ." Presumably he could extend the same courtesy to other readers--other trustworthy readers, at any rate. In spite of the uses in classrooms to which New Critical analysis has been put, New Critics have been far from united behind an authoritative stance in regard to meanings of a text.

They were formalists, thus focusing on an aspect of literature that could be defined and diagnosed and verified--scientifically. Similarly, contemporary structuralists are formalists, seeking verifiable and definable

codes and myths that literary works share, qualities that experienced readers anticipate and utilize well for the special kind of reading that is literary. Jonathan Culler, expatiating upon the artificiality of literary writing, says, "in interpreting a poem . . . we are implicitly relying on assumptions about poetry and structural models without which we could not proceed. . . ." Structuralism, according to Robert Scholes, by providing some method of objectifying and distancing the reader from the text, then invites the hermeneutic or problematic considerations of interpretation by providing parameters so that "the 'subjectivity' of hermeneutic criticism can never be entirely subjective." Structuralist criticism establishes a necessity for an "other," a system outside or beyond the work itself which provides for that work its identity as "literature." Within that essential structure operate its various manifestations, varying according to individual cultures, authors, genres--and even readers. In other words, structural theorists seek to create a set of formal standards, a poetics, that will provide a reliable description of the basic elements within which individual works--with their individual features--operate. Within that poetics, there is room for individual responses from readers. Individual recovery of meaning, Culler says, "depend[s] on operations performed by readers and assumed by poets," to be shared publically and debated.

It is the formal poetics or system that distinguishes structural criticism from other so-called subjective theories. Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theories, like the structural, focuses attention on the balance between reader and text. The text, for Rosenblatt, exists both as a discipline and focus for the reader and also as an inspiration for self-understanding and further search for values and meanings beyond itself. Rosenblatt essentially explores (in Literature as Exploration) the various

profound experiences and sources of growth that a text provides for its readers. The text provides a constraint upon a search for meaning at the same time that it provides an experience (or many experiences) broadening the search for meaning within and beyond the individual reader.

The text, we must remember, is a constraint and a major contributing element in this transactional theory. No doubt the psychoanalytical school, with theorists like Norman Holland and David Bleich, views the text as an integral unit of the text-reader relationship, but they focus attention on the reader's response as the major source of meaning in their Freudian approach. Given what Holland calls each reader's "identity theme," each reader's interpretation becomes inevitable. The text, that is, provides less restraint upon a reader's meaning than does the pre-determined compulsion to read in a certain way. Bleich would spend a year teaching a course in literature, devoting the first half of that year to self-study in preparation for text-study.

Deconstruction, which seems to be the newest confederation of critical theories and which is still defining itself, proclaims the independence of all texts from external influences, from all paradigms of reality. Variations in interpretation depend not on unreliable individual compulsions or proclivities but rather on the many possibilities of meaning that readers can find in words and metaphors. Deeply influenced by linguistic assertions of variability of meaning words--which are often metaphoric and allusive in deconstructionists unexpected ways--view the texts themselves as sources of variable meanings regardless of authorial intention, reader interpretation or cultural affinities. The active, skillful reader seeks and finds these meanings because they are there;

In summarizing the theories described above, we can detect a spectrum of attitudes towards individual independence in reading ranging from extremely authoritarian to extremely subjective. Fewer opt for either extreme, it seems to me, but, with notable exceptions like E. D. Hirsch, more, in recent years, respond warmly to theories somewhat left of center. But we cannot ignore the positive influences of the formalists, New Critics and Structuralists alike, who provide teachers with parameters and processes that help orient students to literature. With some guidance from teachers, students can become accustomed to literary procedures. And the literariness--about which we can lecture and which we can demonstrate--provides one method of curbing which might otherwise be feared as run-away subjectivity. Another curb, however, is provided by the most exciting part of the teaching situation, the classroom of colleagues who can (and inevitably, in a free atmosphere, do) dispute claims and interpretations, enforce tentativeness of attitude, and ultimately help each student to refine and rethink her/his own response to a given text. This kind of classroom procedure has been endorsed by various types of theorists. Rosenblatt wrote: "The major task of the teacher will consist in such clarifications through group discussion of alternative responses and interpretations." Holland wrote, "As with teaching and criticism, personal views do not cancel one another out, making all personal views wrong. People can add the personal views of others and so enrich their own syntheses, leading simultaneously to some agreement in statements and an irreducible privacy in experience." Culler, describing the way in which a range of acceptable readings helps to clarify thought, describes "literary competence [as] the result of an interpersonal experience of reading and discussion. . . ." Subjective approaches do not necessarily need to suffer from chaos; they can be hewn and honed so that they can eliminate

untenable distortion of texts. That they do so is a primary responsibility of teachers.

And subjective approaches enjoy a tremendous advantage for students: they can and do develop training, experience, feedback, pleasure in reading texts for themselves and sharing their responses. In a discussion group consisting of peers and a skillful discussion leader, students can become skillful in perceiving the object of their study, analyzing it, synthesizing it with perceptions of other objects like themselves and their own value systems, and they can grow. I have never led such a discussion when I have failed to observe something that previously had eluded my attention; I have never failed to hear an interpretation that I hadn't heard before, one that deserved further thought and elucidation. Once we dispense with the demand from a complex stimulus like a literary text that it stand still and submit to a single interpretation, we can invite students to do what scholars do: engage in powerful controversies that provide pleasure and sharpen thinking. I do not believe that we teachers and critics even want final announcements about literary texts. Just as soon as agreement would appear final, I am sure we would eliminate that text from further consideration. The great poems and plays will never exhaust their possibilities.

Students' cognitive processes build, evolve, according to their genuine ability to form concepts, to enlarge their categories of understanding and to increase their powers of differentiation. According to cognitivists, all learning begins with attention, and it is maintained through active manipulation of ideas. A literary discussion, as we have seen, now sanctified by many theorists who are willing to invite individual responses, provokes participation, thus ensuring that learning will take place, at least among those who participate. Furthermore, such participation demands

tentativeness in proposals that classmates can accept, modify, or reject, in the best traditions of democratic behavior. Literature lends itself extraordinarily well to this kind of experience; it also provides a model for procedures of meetings of minds on issues other than literary ones. Students emerging from a semester of these experiences can feel justifiably confident in their ability to read and think as members of a group--and as individuals. Not all of them. But enough to make this speculation significant.

The Perry study to which I alluded earlier equates the kind of intellectual development derived from conflicting opinions and independent judgments of those opinions with an ethical development that Perry calls "relative." It is an ethics derived from "flowing equilibria," of intellectual structures "that an individual maintains among the stresses of coexistent incompatible states . . . (e.g., wholeheartedness in the midst of tentativeness)." The good teacher, says Perry, "becomes one who supports in his students a more sustained groping, exploration, and synthesis. His acts of evaluation must subtend more than discrete rights and wrongs, and extend through time to assist discrimination among complex patterns of interpretation." No teacher of literature, no leader of discussions on contemporary American novels, could describe more clearly the skill and importance of this role.

Perry's study, executed at Harvard with approximately 135 students, described the development of their ethical attitudes: they began with an authoritative acceptance of right and wrong, developed an openness to multiple possibilities, grew into a recognition of relative "rightness" with correct answers dependent upon circumstances, and finally evolved into a commitment to this relativistic point of view. The ethics here is not one of ultimate acceptance of authority. Rather, it is an ethics that serves what Karl

Popper calls an open society, a "society in which individuals are confronted with personal decisions," one that demands no abdication of discriminating and differentiating thinking, especially from those members most qualified to lead it, the educated people emerging from our colleges. It is a society that demands that its members personally commit themselves to serious thinking about personal commitments, to that kind of declaration of independence.

Poetry, according to Robert Penn Warren, provides the individual with the "dynamic affirmation of, as well as the image of, the concept of self." If we teachers of literature do our job properly, we can enhance the uses of poetry by using it to help commit people to independence, to a reliable concept of self. Yes, they can read--and think--for themselves. This ideal goal of the teaching of literature is not an impossible goal.